

At the start of every year we listen to parts of the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians; and in this Year A of the Cycle of Sunday readings we begin at the beginning and follow the letter for the first four chapters of the correspondence until we reach Lent.

You have probably never noticed this; partly because no one has ever pointed it out to you; and the second reading is largely ignored by everyone except the person reading it. Certainly most preachers pass by the second reading. Yet here we have a privileged insight into a young community in the early Church, striving to come to terms with the Gospel in a world which did not give a ready welcome to ideas that promoted the idea of love for all other people, including enemies; that valued the poor; that spoke in awe of a man who died the death of a slave on the cross in far away Jerusalem and who is now acclaimed as God.

Corinth was a city on the up and on the make. “Not for everyone the journey to Corinth” was a proverb of the day. It was cut-throat commercialism, dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, and with a distinct inclination towards the racy, if not the outright immoral.

Not a great seed-bed for the Christian faith; and yet it took root, though not without intense growth-pains, which drove Paul to distraction. He had worked with them and among them for eighteen months before leaving them to move to new pastures. A little later he got word from various sources that things were not going well and he wrote to answer issues that they community raised with him and others had pointed out to Paul with exasperation.

The problems included the wealthy getting drunk and bloated before sharing the Eucharist; hob-nobbing in their wealthy clique before the poor arrived; and the question of what happened to those who had died – what did the Resurrection mean? Paul's teachings on both these points are essential to our beliefs, but they come later in the letter. Over the next several weeks we will be listening to Paul's introductory comments.

After the conventional greeting, which we heard today, Paul attacks the community for breaking into factions. Where is their unity in the Lord? Some are campaigning (it seems) for Cephas, an alternative name for Peter, an apostle with whom Paul had at least one serious run-in; others are shouting approval for Apollos, a visiting preacher who made a powerful impression; others are sticking with Paul. And he is mad about it all. “I am for Christ” he will cry in frustration. Pointing out that Christ is what should be holding them together, not petty allegiances and friendships.

He will go on to talk about the power of Christ crucified. Something

incomprehensible to Greeks for whom crucifixion was shame beyond shaming; and a scandal to the Jews who knew that the Book of Moses called Deuteronomy by us cursed anyone who was hanged upon a tree. It is one of the most powerful passages Paul ever penned.

This insight into a local Christian community at the beginning of the world's journey of faith as it struggles to live in the light of Christ in a world which lived by very different standards, should inspire us to reflect upon our community's faith-journey as we progress into the twenty-first century and seek to steer our way through very turbulent waters.

Before Christmas we asked you to fill in a survey about how you felt about what was happening at St Bede's. Thank you all who took the time to respond. In response to one troublesome aspect on which some of you made comment we are addressing today. No more will you be dug in the back to tell you the offertory bag is behind you. Henceforth we will collect from the front and you will see the bags approach. The gifts will then be brought up together in procession.

A report on the full results of the survey will be given at a parish meeting on Thursday 26th January to which you are all cordially but firmly invited.

The Bishop has challenged us to become a community of missionary outreach and liturgical excellence. The survey was part of our seeking to respond to that call. We also had the Day with the Lord in October, seeking to have the church open to welcome people to “come and see” as the Lord invited his first disciples. The Advent Victorian Festival was another attempt to bring people to this place, celebrate in the church in the Eucharist and outside with Christmas food. Both events were successful without being perfect and give foundations for further building towards fulfilling the Bishop's challenge.

This is not a venture that is the calling of a few folk. To succeed it must be a parish adventure where all give of their time and talent, as well as their treasure. We are very good at giving with great generosity to every good cause but giving time and expertise can be more costly; and also more rewarding.

We are living in uncertain times. Many people are feeling insecure; some are increasingly desperate. The Prime Minister this week identified mental health as an area of grave concern which must receive some priority. Young men are committing suicide in terrible numbers. The signs are clear that the world is deeply troubled and searching for answers, crying out for hope.

We have to respond, for Christ is the answer. The waves are crashing, the storm rages; but we know His voice will calm the storm and restore peace.